DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 041 018 TE 001 929

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TITLE Controversy in the Classroom: Ethnic Studies Programs.
PUB DATE Apr 70
NOTE 11p.; Speech given at a meeting of the National School Boards Association, San Francisco, April 12, 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.65
DESCRIPTORS *Community Attitudes, Community Involvement, *Cultural Pluralism, *Curriculum Enrichment, Educational Resources, *English Education, Ethnic Groups, *Ethnic Studies, Financial Support, Instructional Materials, Minority Groups

ABSTRACT

The declining interest of the general public in ethnic minority studies and the even more alarming disinterest of educators indicates that all too many Americans have viewed the study of the culture and problems of American blacks, Indians, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans as a fad. By fighting for stable funds for ethnic studies, by becoming acquainted with the available materials for teaching, and by involving community members as resource people, educators can begin to find answers to urgent minority problems, and create, even in homogeneous communities, an awareness of our pluralistic wealth. (MF)

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CONTROVERSY IN THE CLASSROOM: ETHNIC STUDIES PROGRAMS

Nancy S. Prichard

Anyone in the spring of 1970 who comes before you to discuss "Controversy in the Classroom" is presented with an appalling array of choices, for what subject connected with education these days is not controversial. If we turn to the traditional American verities, it might be thought that a non-controversial subject could be found, but when we begin with even such universal goods as love and motherhood, we can find ourselves immediately in the midst of a furore over sex education in the schools. If we--perhaps in confusion--turn from that to the flag, we can find ourselves embroiled in the controversy over whether everyone must recite the Pledge of Allegiance first thing in the morning. But surely apple pie will be a safe subject--until the question of free lunches comes up, and then we are once again in the midst of discord, and this time with the additional factor that money is involved.

Furthermore, for a large part of the adult population involved in the business of education, and here I refer to teachers, administrators, and school board members, the constant contention, the endless controversy, the relentless awareness of disharmony becomes a weariness to the soul if not a perpetual headache. We shrink from realizing that solving one problem may have no discernible impact on what we reluctantly come to perceive as a cluster of problems. As one of my students wrote last spring in a poem produced for our minority literature class, "Peace is no longer a state of tranquillity, but of astonishment!" As always, part of our discomfort grows out of our very lives and the unconcious expectations we bring to the present moment. The general population is very young, more than half now are under 30--or is it 25? But the backbone of the power structure--whether we recognize ourselves as such or not--is of the generation which remembers the Great Depression or the Second World War, or both, and more importantly, remembers the tales it was told of a peaceful period "before the Depression" or "before the War," and somewhere in the back

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of our minds lies the false expectation that there is a way back to those halcyon days, if only we could find it. If this is part of the source of our discomfort, perhaps part of our weariness stems from our unwilling acceptance of the necessity to move forward--not back--to work at partial solutions in the belief that together we can make our new world of the future even better than those illusory good old days look in retrospect. So we face the controversies and work toward solutions where we can be effective.

All of which is merely background to help explain why the controversy in the classroom I want to talk about today is the area of Black Studies or Ethnic Studies or Minority Studies--however it is designated in your part of the world. The designation will probably depend on the minority group most visible, most oppressed, and most active in your area. The group may be Afro-Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, American Indians (or native Americans as many of them prefer to be called), or Americans of Asian ancestry. In places like New York and Chicago and other large Northern cities, there are Black Studies Programs and Puerto Rican Studies Programs; in places like San Diego and Los Angeles, there are Mexican American Studies Programs; in the Southwest and parts of California, American Indians are the focus of new programs. But whatever the label and whatever the extent of the educational effort, the activity, as I said, depends on the visibility and activism of the oppressed minority. The most visible and active, as well as the most generally oppressed group is undoubtedly the Afro-Americans, and so most often as I talk, I will refer to Black Studies Programs, but I would have you understand that this is verbal shorthand and what I say can be equally applicable to the other groups.

To live in a homogeneous community which has no visible minority group members does not mean that the question of Ethnic Studies or Minority Literatures in the English classroom will not arise. If the problem seems less pressing and its surrounding controversy more remote, the plain fact is that it should not be. No student today can, or should, be kept unaware of the pluralistic nature of American Society and culture, nor deprived of the opportunity--even vicariously--to live in it and grow with it, and eventually to take a knowledgeable part in its governance. Which is why I say, speaking specifically as an English teacher, that the literatures of America's ethnic and racial minority groups should be in every English classroom, at every level from elementary school through college, no matter what the racial composition of the student population, the faculty, or the community. This will not "solve" the problems of racism, and intolerance, and oppression of minorities, groups which have in the past contributed more than we acknowledge to the whole fabric of our society; but it is one part of a solution to those problems and one we can work at now.

However, it seems to me that people generally, and educators in particular, are losing the sense of urgency that led to the creation of Black Studies Programs over the past few years. We seem to be losing sight of the necessity for introducing the literature by America's minority group writers into the English curriculum. So that you will not see this merely as special pleading, or think I pick up this feeling that there has been a relaxation of effort simply from vibrations in the air, let me cite some examples of what I mean. They come from sources as remote as the government and as close as a colleague, and their seeming pervasiveness is as alarming as any specific instance.

Probably the most damaging statement, because of its air of authority, is Daniel P. Moynihan's widely quoted "Memorandum for the President," the full text of which appeared in the New York Times on Sunday, March 1. Among other things, many of which infuriated blacks, Moynihan said:

> The time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of "benign neglect." The subject has been too much talked about. The forum has been too much taken over to /by/ hysterics, paranoids, and boodlers on all sides. We may need a period in which Negro progress continues and racial rhetoric fades.

To give Moynihan his due, he did go on to say, "Greater attention to Indians, Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans would be useful," but how many of your newspapers carried that quote? And how many people, pushed by continual crisis and weary of controversy, read beyond the phrase, "benign neglect," and having read so far, how many sighed with relief and turned to a new problem which had not yet proved so obdurate?

A second example: a month ago I attended an annual meeting of about 200 junior college English teachers in an area of the country where there is not only a sizable black population, and where there have been "incidents," but where there is a large Indian population; in addition, the city where the meeting was held is in an agricultural area which depends largely on migratory labor for harvesting the crops, and just last year the inhuman living conditions of the workers, largely Mexican-Americans, were the subject of investigations by both the county and the state. Given these demographic conditions, and assuming, perhaps naively, that junior college teachers, of all people, should be concerned with opening up--if not creating--educational opportunities for those who have heretofore been deprived of higher education, I was appalled

to find that there were no blacks or Indians on the program; there was only one non-white face in the audience; and there was nothing on the program having to do with teaching English as a second language, or with minority literature. When I mentioned this to another conference goer, her reply was, "Oh well, I wouldn't worry about it; we did the black thing last year, didn't we? Maybe even overdid it." What she meant was that one of the main speakers the previous year was a well-known black writer; that there had been a study group on black literature; and that several black students had been on the program. In her terms that was "doing the black thing"; and her obvious assumption was that having "done it," the junior college English teachers in that region could forget about it.

A third example: some of you perhaps attended the NEA-Human Relations Center Conference in Washington, D.C., in mid-February, or perhaps someone from your college or district attended. All of you should also be aware that at its annual national meeting last November, the Executive Committee and the Board of Directors of the NCTE approved the creation of a Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English. The NEA Conference and the NCTE Task Force are related by the fact that the director of the Task Force was NCTE's representative at the NEA-Human Relations Conference. Let me quote extensively from her report of the meeting:

> The central item on the agenda was, ostensibily, criticism and adaptation and, finally, adoption of a resolution on school desgregation/integration which was to be presented at the national conference of the NEA in July, 1970. In essence, the resolution declared that school integration had failed and recommended that the objective of providing cross-cultural-racial-economic experiences for children/young adults be shifted from the schools to the voluntary social service agencies such as the Girl Scouts and the YMCA.

> Short-sightedness and a lack of commitment to the goal of integration were indicated, as far as some of us were concerned, by the reasons given for the "failure of integration," and we were appalled by what seemed to be a gradualist position. . . . My own distress was compounded by the manner in which this important business was conducted: we were given fifteen minutes to digest the paper. . .and were given forms which only offered gross categories within which to indicate our reaction to key positions of the paper (Mildly Disagree? Strongly Agree? . . .) with no invitation to show the whys or wherefors.
>
> Well, some of us got together and formed a Black Caucus at which a different paper was drafted and our objections to the original one outlined. Saturday morning the substitute position paper was adopted by a voice vote. I was pleased about that. But I continue to be disturbed by the direction the NEA-HRC was willing, indeed, interested in steering its membership. I'm afraid that it is symptomatic of the posture of abandonment which is spreading and taking root in this country. . . . (In fact, my pleasure about the adoption of "our" position paper is tempered by my observation and interpretation of why it was relatively easily accepted. Those participants and officers were tired of all that debate and all those objections and said, "Oh all right. Let's get something to take to the general membership. I'm sick of all these words, and want to go home.")

Finally, from the latest publication of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, a pamphlet entitled "Racism in America and How to Combat It" (Clearinghouse Publication, Urban Series No. 1, January 1970), let me quote a paragraph from the conclusion:

> . . .there are signs that many white Americans are already tired of hearing about "the race question." Because most whites conceive of racism only in the overt forms, they believe it is rapidly disappearing or has already diminished to an insignificant level. (p. 38)

Perhaps this whole sense of relaxation of effort can be specifically related to education by one more quote, this time from Shelly Halpern, writing on "The Fashionable Environment" in Change Magazine (March-April 1970):

> If black and urban studies were the fashion two years ago, pollution, ecology and the preservation of resources seem to be the glamour offerings of the current academic year. (p. 6)

"Fashion" and "glamour offerings": if it weren't for the context, one might be reading either the women's page or the financial section of the daily newspaper. But education for human relations, which is basic to the ideal of a democratic, pluralistic society, cannot depend on fads in either curriculum or financing. Of course it is difficult to maintain the sense of newness and discovery that attended the creation of the first Black Studies Programs; it is equally difficult to remain feeling virtuous about it very long, when the depth of the need is once realized; and even crusaders have often to be described as "tireless" to indicate their ability to generate an activating emotional response beyond the commitment of ordinary men. On top of all this, there are the practical difficulties of effecting change in any institution, particularly in education: the often emotional resistance of the community; the unavailability of materials; the scarcity of qualified instructors; the persistent problem of budget allocation. But none of these is insuperable.

As community college faculty and administrators, you have more opportunity and responsibility to keep in touch with the community at large than most educators, and one of your valuable functions is to serve as a communication link with the community served by your school. You may be familiar with the Gallup Poll conducted in February 1969 for a philanthropic corporation called CFK, Ltd., and published last fall under the rather long, but plain title: A Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools 1969. One of the findings was that nearly two-thirds (65%)

of the people polled said they would like to know more about the schools in their community:

> When asked specifically what kind of information they would like to have, the answers deal to a large extent with the courses taught--the curriculum--innovations being introduced and why--college requirements--and the like. Significantly, there is great interest in the very areas that most school publicity presently neglects--the content of courses and the educational process versus school operations. (p. 9)

That seems a clear directive on how to approach the problem of community resistance to the changes in curriculum and course content entailed in creating and maintaining an Ethnic Studies Program. People want to know more about "innovations being introduced and why," and about "the educational process," which can only be an invitation to somehow let them know these things. Simply increasing public relations efforts or distributing more news releases may not be enough, however. In a three year study of change by the IDEA Research Division (IDEA stands for the Institute for Development of Educational Activties, Inc., created by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation), it was found that "information sessions. . .were of little value. 'Telling' people is relatively ineffective. They have to get involved. . . ." (The IDEA Reporter, Fall Quarter 1969, p. 9) And certainly there is no better way to get the community involved in the kinds of programs I'm talking about than to call upon members of the various ethnic groups to serve as resource people for the program, from the planning stages to taking part in classroom discussion.

The unavailability of materials--books, films, records, and so on--is no longer really a problem. The problem is more likely to be unfamiliarity with what is available. The publication of textbooks which present an ethnically

balanced view of American literature and American history is increasing every month, and there are bibliographies by the mile to guide teachers and librarians toward the hidden resources of American writing by and about minority group members. The only caution is that, because black and ethnic studies have been "glamour offerings," some unscrupulous publishers have jumped on the bandwagon and come out with materials that are simply unacceptable. This has happened not only in the field of Afro-American books, but is also happening to books by and about Indians. The Winter 1970 issue of The Indian Historian in the book review section warns:

> Some publishers are printing books without proper editorial authentication and supervision, and without examining the credentials of those who are accepted in some circles as "experts" on Indian history. A certain amount of sheer trash is coming out of these publishing mills.

One of the ways to guard against these materials is to again involve members of the minority group in your community, but more importantly, to rely on knowledgeable faculty members. Some schools are lucky enough to have minority groups represented equitably on their faculties, though this does not necessarily mean that all the blacks or Indians or Mexican-Americans on a faculty will agree, any more than that all the non-blacks or non-Indians will agree. But they will represent a spectrum of opinion and attitudes, which can be a healthy antidote to the human proclivity for lumping groups of people who have some superficial resemblance to each other under the term "they," which is generally a prelude to some encompassing and suspect generalization. Schools which are not so lucky as to have faculty members who have read widely in ethnic literatures can provide released time and the funds for

teachers to go to school, attend summer institutes of intensive study, and go to professional meetings. School districts can support inservice training programs and provide not only incentives for teachers to attend, but supply funds to bring in experts to conduct the inservice training.

And that brings us to the persistent problem of budget allocation. One phrase that is often heard in this connection is "It's a question of your priorities." Yes, it certainly is. Another, and less elegant phrase is, "Put your money where your mouth is." If we believe in quality education (no matter how maligned the phrase has become recently) for <u>all</u> our children at all levels, there must be, indeed, greater expenditures in some parts of the budget. I have mentioned subsidizing additional education for faculty. The library will need more money for the acquisition of books, films, film strips, microfilm--all the materials that are necessary for a modern learning resource center--and when I mentioned the miles of bibliographies available now, I had in mind the needs of librarians who want to provide a balanced collection in literature, history, sociology, economics, in nearly every classification, in fact. Beyond this, even if money is available from the federal government (which seems less and less likely every day) to start a multi-ethnic program at your college, remember that such funding is limited, which means that the college budget will need some rearranging to insure funds to continue the program after the initial year or two. In fact, where the money comes from is a crucial factor in ethnic studies programs: contingency funds called by any name soon run out; special funds, experiment money, foundation grants, out-of-phase grants, these are sources

of soft money. What must be provided is hard money, permanent support for the tremendous task of providing educational programs which acknowledge the cultural pluralism of America and accept the differences among men with pleasure. Ryland Crary, in Humanizing the School, puts it this way:

> The burden of work to be done is the teaching of the ultimate reality that nobody's ethnocentrism is a any good. (p. 88)

Perhaps Americans are "tired of hearing about 'the race question'," and would prefer to turn to the more glamourous issues of environmental control and ecology and preservation of resources, but the need for continued effort is most important now, when the controversy seems to have subsided. To quote the Commission on Civil Rights once more:

> The racist attitudes, behavior patterns, insitutional structures, and cultural heritage built up over. . . three centuries are profoundly embedded in our society. They cannot be eradicated overnight, or in just a few years. Therefore, effectively combating racism will require continuous and prolonged persistence by both whites and Negroes. They must be deeply committed--indeed, dedicated--to this goal. (p. 38)

And I can think of no place where such commitment and dedication can be put to more effective use than in our English classrooms.

Speech given at a meeting of the National School Boards Association, San Francisco, April 12, 1970.